



Sunflowers: A Wildlife Bistro

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Most everyone has watched a televised baseball game at one time or another. As the camera pans the field and zooms in on the dugout, you can't help but notice that most all of the players are working something in their mouths. For some it's tobacco, for others it's bubble gum, and then there are those who have a mouth full of sunflower seeds. Over the years, sunflower seeds have become a very popular and nutritious snack food. But humans are not the only ones who enjoy the wonderful nutty flavor provid-

ed by the small seeds. They are also a favored food for many species of wildlife.

The sunflower (*Helianthus* of the *Asteraceae* family) has been around for a long time, and this native, warm season, tap-rooted annual has a long history of association with people. Around 1000 B.C. it was used and domesticated by pre-Columbian Indians in central North America not only as a food and oil source, but also for dye and thread. Francisco Pizarro found the Incas hailing the sunflower as an image of their sun

god. The use of the plant spread eastward and in 1510, the Spaniards along the Atlantic coast areas were introduced to the plant. They liked it so much they carried seeds back to Europe where it was grown in gardens as curiosities. Lewis and Clark also made mention of its use by Native Americans in their journals. Pioneers planted the wild sunflower near their homes to repel mosquitoes and used the blossoms in bathwater to relieve arthritis pain.

Some time before 1800 the sunflower reached Russia where it was raised for

food and later, through selective breeding, the giant one-headed, large-seeded plants we know today were developed. Since then, dozens of varieties of the flower have been developed in all colors, heights, and sizes.

Although we consider the sunflower as a “single” flower it is actually two different types of flower – the ray and disk. The ray flowers have the big, ray-like structures around the edge of the flower while the disk flowers occupy the middle of it where the seeds are located. There are many combinations of the two, and it is possible to have the total absence of one or the other. Ray or disk flowers may be male, female, or both, and either fertile or infertile. Usually the ray flowers are female and infertile, while the disk flowers can be both male and female and fertile.

When you look closely, you can see that the disk flowers grow in a mesmerizing pattern of two opposite spirals. It can best be seen either before the disk flowers open up, or after the seed has set and all of the flower parts have fallen off. Sunflowers are very adaptive and can grow on most well drained soils. They are drought tolerant and can be planted in rows, or broadcast in small or large acreage.

The leaves are sticky, dark green and alternately arranged on the stalk. Native plants have multiple heads, while hybridized can have single or multiple heads. They can grow from 1 to 14 feet in height. With natural varieties, the seeds can remain viable in the soil for many years until conditions are optimum for germination. Depending on the variety and growing conditions, five pounds of planted sunflower seed can produce from 800 to 1200 pounds of seed per acre.

The hybrid black oilseed sunflower (*Peredovik*) is probably the most popular seed for wildlife, although almost any variety will attract wildlife of some type or another. The black oilseed is an improved variety of the native annual sunflower and is very nutritious, high calorie, and high in protein. Over 40 species of birds are known to eat black oilseed sunflowers including chickadees, nuthatches, titmice, goldfinches and house finches, redbirds, blue jays, sparrows, and buntings. The softer outer shell makes it easier for smaller birds to consume. The seed also has a high con-

centration of oil which is especially important in winter. Birds use their oil glands to spread the oil over their feathers to keep them buoyant, dry, and warm.

Sunflowers are also favored by mourning doves, turkeys, pheasants, and quail. Although not a preferred forage plant for deer, they may eat the young tender leaves and developing seed heads. Evidently, the flowers become less palatable as they mature. Other small mammals like gophers, squirrels, rats, and mice also eat the seeds. Butterflies, beetles, and bees are attracted to the flower because of the nectar.

If you are growing sunflowers on a large scale, you should mow or cut random areas to allow the seed to drop to the ground for easy access of ground-feeding birds and animals, while leaving other plants standing for the “swingers and hangers” species. By cutting a few and allowing others to stand and drop naturally, you also provide cover for species like quail.

Sunflowers should be planted in a well-disked seed bed. They are so versatile that you can plant just a few in your back yard, a row in your garden, or by the acre. They can be planted anytime between April 15 and June 15. If you are planting for that September dove shoot, you should plant before May 15 to ensure the seeds are mature in time for opening day.

The sunflower is such a popular wildlife seed that *Quail Unlimited* includes it in the National Seed Program. In 2004 they distributed 73,585 pounds of seed which planted approximately 24,500 acres of dove fields. If you want to plant sunflowers as a game food, your local farmers’ cooperative will probably carry the seed. For backyard or garden planting, dozens of varieties can be purchased from your local garden shop or your annual seed catalogues.

If you wish to attract wildlife to your home or property on a small or large scale, sunflowers are a very easy plant to grow. Try some this spring and just see who drops in for a snack. ☎

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